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Language Learning in Task Management and Task Accomplishment

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Abstract: In this paper we study student interaction in English and Swedish courses at a Finnish university. We focus on language choices made in task-related activities in small group interaction. Our research interests arose from the change in the teaching curriculum, in which content and language courses were integrated at Tampere University of Technology in 2013. Using conversation analysis, we analysed groups of 4-5 students who worked collaboratively on a task via a video conference programme. The results show how language alternation has different functions in 1) situations where students orient to managing the task, e.g., in transitions into task, or where they orient to technical problems, and 2) situations where students accomplish the task. With the results, we aim to show how language alternation can provide interactional opportunities for language learning. The findings will be useful in designing tasks in the future.

1. Introduction

Working life has become increasingly global and intercultural. Consequently, the ability to communicate in professional situations in intercultural contexts is a skill that is highly valued in working life. To ensure that graduates have adequate communication skills, higher education has to respond to the needs of the labour market. One such response is the integration of content and language studies, which is beneficial for the graduates when they enter the global working life and need to communicate in intercultural professional contexts.

Previous studies on multilingual education have focused on English as the additional language used alongside the first language(s). The focus on English is prompted by the fact that most universities in Europe, including Finland, have chosen English as their additional working language (see, e.g., Ammon & McConnell, 2002; Wächter & Maiworm, 2008). Other languages besides English are used in higher education as additional

languages mainly in countries where they have an official status. Finland is officially a bilingual country, and therefore Swedish language studies are obligatory for Finnish university students.

Content and language integrated learning (CLIL) in higher education has been studied previously by, e.g., Dafouz Milne & Núñez Perucha, 2010; Smit, 2010a, 2010b; Smit & Dafouz, 2012. In Finland, both empirical CLIL research and surveys on the implementation of CLIL have been carried out mainly in primary and secondary education (e.g., Nikula & Marsh, 1996, 1997; Nikula & Järvinen, 2013). Thus, there is clearly a need to study the use of CLIL in higher education. In this paper, we address this need with a micro level study on the practices university students use in a CLIL setting.

2. Aims

The aim of this paper is to analyze from a microanalytic interactional perspective how university students in English and Swedish courses use language alternation as a resource in learning content specific ways of using language. On a general level, the results of the analysis will contribute towards a better understanding of how students interact with each other, and how they achieve intersubjective understanding of the action-at-hand (see, e.g., Sacks, 1992; ten Have, 2007; Sidnell, 2010). A more specific focus of analysis lies in the use of two or more languages as a resource in task-related activities.

Questions we are interested in answering are: Can we learn more about the learning process and language learning needs in situations where two or more languages are used alongside each other? Can the results help teachers design better tasks or instructions for the tasks?

3. Data and Method

3.1 Data

Our data was collected from English and Swedish courses that are part of the Bachelor degree requirement. The English course is designed for students at CEFR levels B2-C1, and the Swedish course is designed for students at CEFR levels B1-B2. The data used in this paper consist of video recordings and transcripts of small groups of 3-5 students, who were working on a task that was accomplished using a video conference programme.

The task that the students were given was divided into four stages. The first stage consisted of reading an article related to the students' field as a homework assignment. Secondly, the students were instructed to find information on the topic discussed in the article. Each small group was instructed to focus on a different aspect of the topic. In the third stage of the task the students discussed their findings in a videoconference. This third stage is where our data is recorded from. The fourth stage of the task included sharing the outcome of the group discussion with the rest of the class in Moodle. The videoconferences lasted from 30 minutes up to one hour, and they were transcribed using a transcription system based on the system originally developed by Gail Jefferson (see Appendix 1).

3.2 Method

Adopting a conversation analytic approach, we analysed the video recordings together with the transcripts to uncover how the students construct social actions. This inductive method places emphasis on practices the participants themselves observably treat as relevant at any given moment. Thus, the perspective we take on the organization of action-in-interaction is inherently emic, and no pre-defined categories are used.

We also draw on other approaches that share an understanding of learning as something that takes place in interaction and in co-operation with other people (see Lave and Wenger, 1991). The theory of situated learning developed by Lave and Wenger (1991) emphasizes the co-construction of knowledge, and the situatedness of learning in a specific social and physical context. The theory has been used among conversation analysts who have an interest in language learning (see, e.g., Brouwer and Wagner, 2004; Firth, 2009; Sahlström, 2009). According to the theory of situated learning, learning can be defined as changes in the way people participate in their communities of practice. This is relevant when studying how people become competent members of the community – in this case students becoming experts in their own field.

As any other action, language learning, or "doing" language learning is one form of social action. In other words, learning and use are inseparable from each other (Hall, 2004; Firth and Wagner, 2007; Hall et al., 2011; Pallotti and Wagner, 2011).The sociocultural paradigm of learning has been used by conversation analysts (see, e.g., Wong, 2000a, 2000b; Mondada and Pekarek-Doehler, 2004), and in recent years conversation analysis (hereafter CA) has been increasingly used in SLA research. Pallotti & Wagner (2011), in their book on second language learning as social practice, state that conversation analysts interested in language learning can describe how the participants do learning, in other words analysts will "look at the practices in which participants show an orientation towards gaining control of linguistic resources in interaction." (Pallotti & Wagner, 2011:4).

4. Analysis

The following examples present sequences that include language alternation. The analysis shows how students use different languages as interactional resources in task management and task accomplishment. Before the students can accomplish the task they need to come to a mutual understanding of what the task entails, and how they can

accomplish the task (Hellermann and Pekarek Doehler, 2010). Our task management data extracts come from sequences of negotiation of what the task entails; transitions into task, and sequences where students orient to technical problems. Data extracts from task accomplishment come from sequences where students orient to accomplishing the task.

In example (1), we will show what kind of functions language alternation has in transitions into task. According to Hellermann and Pekarek Doehler (2010:43) transitions into task are situations where the participants can explicitly display and negotiate their understanding of the task. In the example below the participants are starting their group work. Before this sequence the students have spent a significant amount of time (close to 20 minutes) dealing with technical problems, using Finnish only.

Example 1. ACP Group 3 SWE. 21:15 Ska vi börja

1 Teuvo FI Joo alotettaisko [(.) SWE ska vi börja

yeah should we start should we start

2 Jouni FI [Jaa nii mi mitä täs

oh yeah what

3 FI kuuluu tehä muute

are we supposed to do anyway here

4 Niilo SWE Va ska vi göra

what should we do

5 Kari SWE Vi ska diskutera om [våra frågor om företagets

We are going to discuss our questions about the company's

6 Teuvo SWE [vi ska öö prata vi ska göra

we are going to uh talk we are going to do

7 SWE [våra grupparbete

our group work

8 Jouni SWE [och vad ska vi diskutera

and what are we going to discuss

In line 1, Teuvo initiates the start of group work in Finnish, and repeats this initiative in Swedish. Jouni displays a problem of understanding the task at hand (*oh yeah what are we supposed to do anyway here*, lines 2-3). Niilo also displays uncertainty, but does this in Swedish (*what should we do*, line 4). After this, the other participants select Swedish in their responses. By using the target language, the participants orient to task accomplishment, and they display an understanding of using the target language as an essential part of accomplishing the task. This type of language alternation in our Swedish data is one of the quite rare instances where Swedish is used in task management. These types of actions provide opportunities for authentic interaction and for language learning.

Language alternation occurs often in our data in situations where the participants orient to technical problems. The following data extract illustrates orientation to technical problems.

Example 2. ACP group 3 SWE. 21:30 ei kuulu kunnolla ollenkaan

1	Kari	FI Nonii (1,5) SWE så-
		alright, so
		((Kari straightens his back, leans slightly forward))
2	Teuvo	FI (x) ei kuulu kunnolla ollenkaan
		I can't hear properly at all
3		(0,5)
4	Niilo	FI Kuuluu kuuluu

I can hear I can hear

((3 minutes omitted from transcript))

5 Kari FI Entäs ny↑

How about now

6 Niilo SWE De e bra:

It is good

7 Kari SWE Samma här

same here

Kari uses Swedish to mark transition into task (*alright*, so, line 1). During his utterance he shifts his posture so that it is more upright, and he leans slightly forward. These nonverbal cues, which are visible to the other group members, display orientation to the task at hand. At this point Teuvo switches back to Finnish in orienting to technical problems (*I can't hear properly at all*, line 2). This utterance is followed by a long exchange of turns on adjusting the volume (not included in the transcript). The sequence is closed by a question-answer pair where the question is produced by Kari in Finnish (*how about now*, line 5). Niilo answers the question using Swedish (*it is good*, line 6). This example illustrates that participants can alternate between languages within adjacency pairs. Here the first pair part on line is produced in Finnish, and the second pair part is produced in Swedish. In this manner the participants can align with each other on the action level, yet simultaneously project a move forwards, to an action in which it is relevant to use the target language.

Using the next-turn proof procedure, we can say that selecting Swedish is a relevant action for the other participants; for in the turn that follows, Kari also switches to Swedish and agrees with Niilo (*Samma här*, line 7).

In comparison, students in the English groups use English predominantly throughout task accomplishment, but also to a large extent in task management. This is the case also when they orient to transitions into task accomplishment and when they deal with technical problems. The following example illustrates language use both a transition into task (lines 1-5) and orienting to technical problems (lines 10-13).

Example 3. ACP group 4 ENG. 13:02 shall we begin

1	Leo	Shall we be↑g***i***n:
2		(1)
3	Eero	(xx)-let's begin:
4		(1)
5	?	yeah.
6	Leo	so everyone has (.) read the text, I guess
7		(.)
8	Leo	(or no.)
9		(1)

10	Eero	(uh) could you (.) lower your (.) volume a bit.
11		it's uh- quite (.) loud
12		(.)
13	Leo	ok:a:↑y

When the students have established the video and audio connection, they move into the task using English (line 1). In contrast with the examples from our Swedish data, this example shows how the students have the linguistic, interactional and pragmatic competence to use the target language also when orienting to technical problems (line 10).

We will now move on to describing a common practice of language alternation, found in our Swedish data. We call this practice *translation technique*. It occurs in sequences where students share information they have gathered before the videoconference. Briefly described, it consists of students first sharing information in the target language (Swedish), and repeating it immediately in their first language. When the students do this, they often frame the translation with the Finnish word *eli* (*so*). Data extract (4) comes from a sequence where each student shares a piece of information that they have searched at home with the others. This extract is taken from the middle of the sequence.

Example 4. ACP group 3 29:00 eli on ympäristöjohtamista

1 Kari SWE Också varje företagen har egen miljö (.) lagerskap-

also every company has their own environment leadership

2 Kari SWE <som svarar miljöproblemer>

that is responsible for environmental problems

3 Kari FI Eli on ympäristöjohtamista joka yrityksessä

so there is environment management

4 Jouni FI Joo-o

Yeah

5 Niilo SWE =Och tidigare smu:tsiga vatten från fabriken

and earlier dirty water from the factory

6 SWE går på flo:der ((echo: floder))

goes to rivers

7 (5,0)

8 Niilo FI Eli aikaisemmi [laskettiin jätevedet (.) jokiin ((echo: jokiin))

so earlier dirty waters were led to rivers

10 ? FI[öö, ja:

uh and

11 Teuvo SWE Men ida: [gör också några (.) företag det

but now companies make

The translation technique is used repeatedly by the participants. What is interesting is that understanding is ensured by the current speaker in this manner when participants present information, even though the other participants do not display problems in understanding. This technique is employed in our Swedish data, and it does not occur in English data.

The following data extract shows how a problem of understanding of lexical items is displayed in the information sharing sequences in our Swedish data. Usually these other-initiated repair sequences are produced in Finnish. However, there are some instances where participants other-initiate repair in Swedish, as in this case with *vad*. Although low in number, it is evident that the students are able to accomplish these actions also in Swedish.

Example 5. ACP group 3 9:20 vad

1 Niilo SWE O i nittonhundratalet (.) notera man effekten av före-o-rening

And in the 20th century the effects of pollution was noticed

2 Teuvo SWE Vad↑

What

3 Kari FI Mikä se viimene SWE fö:reorening

What was the last pollution

4 Jouni FI Se on saastutta[.minen

It is polluting

5 Niilo FI [eli (1,0) joo↑ eli tuhatyhdeksänsataaluvulla

so yeah so in the 20th century

6 Niilo FI ru- ruvettiin huomaamaan ¤vasta¤ se että se rupeaa

people started to notice only that it starts

7 Niilo FI saastuttamaan

to pollute

The side sequence in which Kari displays problems with understanding is done in Finnish (line 3). After solving the problem in understanding, the participants reconstruct the content by using the translation technique, again initiated with *eli* (*so*). It is interesting to note that even in an instance where a participant explicitly identifies the problem source to be a lexical item, the speaker still reconstructs the entire content of the utterance by using the translation technique.

Data extract (6) shows how problems in retrieving lexical items are dealt with in our English data.

Example 6 ACP group 5 7:18 what's sorvaus

1	Niilo T	second thing:, was that u:h (.) some (.) shapes (.)
2		are (.) hard and expensive or even impossible
3		to manufacture with u:h (x)
4		today's technology:, like
5		what's FI sorvaus in English
6		and- or (.) FI <kon***ei***stus>.
7		(1)
8	Niilo T	they are just (.)
9		h***a***rd to m***a***ke, and-

10		if you- ()
11		3 d (.) print them
12		it's- it- it's might b
13		it might be cheaper and (.)
14		even make some things pos- possible
15		like hollow things it's (.)
16		you can't really-
17		manufacture them (.) easily,
18		(1)
19	Mikko	that's true

In this example the current speaker does not remember the words for "sorvaus" (*lathing*) or "koneistus" (*machining*) in English (lines 5 and 6). When we compare this example to example (5), we can see that the students orient to language alternation in word search situations differently. While in the Swedish data the participants interrupted information sharing to solve language problems, both the speaker and the recipients in our English data let the problem pass, and continue talking about the content. This type of language alternation shows how Finnish and English are resources that are shared by the

participants. Inserting a Finnish word in the middle of otherwise English discussion does not interrupt the ongoing action.

5. Conclusion

CA as a form of microanalysis enables us to identify actions that students construct in their group work at different CEFR levels. Students in our Swedish group use language alternation mainly in task accomplishment. For the most part, they select Finnish as the language to use in actions related to task management. However, as our analysis shows, while it is quite rare, they can also alternate between languages in task management, e.g., in transitions into task. We argue that these instances provide rich opportunities for language learning. Consequently, the educators should attempt to take this into consideration when designing tasks.

Students of English have a high enough competence to orient to the content. Language for them is mainly a vehicle with which content is negotiated. For example, one word code switching into Finnish is typically ignored by other participants. Thus, a code switch that could be seen as a language learning opportunity is rather one resource among others to accomplish the task at hand. This situation would naturally be different if the participants came from different linguistic backgrounds and did not have shared resources.

While students in the Swedish group can accomplish the same task, they display orientations to doing a school task where language is the target of learning. One dominant practice that is revealed in our Swedish data is reading aloud written text. The sentence structure of read-aloud text poses difficulties for the recipients to process the language. The translation technique seems to be essential for the students to achieve intersubjective understanding. However, to be able to develop the students' skills, there is a need to design tasks that force the students away from text when they interact with each other.

Our suggestion for lower levels is to design tasks that force the students away from the text, for example by allowing the students to use a mind map only. This would mean that the students would need to rephrase the information using their own words. In this way the learners not only achieve a deeper understanding of the subject, but also make it easier for their recipients to follow their spoken utterances.

The findings show that similar tasks can be used in studying languages at different CEFR levels. However, the practices that the participants use need to be taken into account when planning tasks for learners. With groups at lower levels, the teacher must ensure that the instructions provide the necessary support to guide the action that will support language use at the current level and give opportunities for learning.

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Appendix 1

Transcription conventions

talk	emphasis
CAPITALS	increased volume
ºhigh circlesº	decreased volume
ta:::lk	prolongation of the preceding sound
tal-	cut-off word
.hhh	inbreath
hh	outbreath
(.)	a micropause of less than 0.4 seconds

pause, timed in tenths of a second

ta[lk]

[tal]king	overlapping utterances

talk=

=talk	latching utterances
(talk)	uncertain transcrption
(x)	unintelligible item, probably one word only
(xx)	unintelligible items, approximately of phrase length
(xxx)	unintelligible items, beyond phrase length

,	continuing intonation
.	falling intonation
?	rising intonation
↑	high pitch
>fast<	fast speech
<slow>	slow speech
£	altered tone of voice, e.g. when quoting somebody
ta(h)lk	breathiness, e.g. in laughter